

SUMMARY OF THE ON-SITE ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE MEETING OCTOBER 23, 2002

The On-site Assessment Committee of the National Environmental Laboratory Accreditation Conference (NELAC) met on Wednesday, October 23, 2002, at 1 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time (EDT). Chairperson Mr. Alfredo Sotomayor of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources led the meeting. A list of action items is given in Attachment A. A list of participants is given in Attachment B. The meeting agenda is given in Attachment C. *The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the assessors' electronic forum, proposed glossary definitions for presentation at the Eighth NELAC Interim Meeting (NELAC 8i), and logistics for upcoming committee meetings.*

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Sotomayor called the meeting to order with a review of the agenda, which was expanded at Mr. Charles Dyer's request to include discussion of the Chapter 5 quality systems assessment checklist. Mr. Sotomayor then proceeded to announcements. He passed along a reminder from Ms. Jeanne Hankins about the Annual Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Quality Systems Training Conference, noting that registration for the conference closes on November 8, 2002. He also announced that the deadline for early registration for the NELAC 8i had passed. Finally, Mr. Sotomayor encouraged committee members to join the Institute for National Environmental Laboratory Accreditation (INELA) by NELAC 8i to effect a smooth transition from NELAC to INELA. There being no other announcements, Mr. Sotomayor led a review of the minutes from the committee's October 9, 2002, teleconference. The minutes were approved as written.

STATUS OF ACTION ITEMS

Mr. Sotomayor reviewed the status of the committee's action items from the October 9 teleconference, as follows:

- Assessors' electronic forum – Preparation and initial follow-up action items complete
- NELAC Board of Directors (BoD) teleconference October 10, 2002 – Mr. Sotomayor noted that he had alerted the BoD that the committee's proposed glossary definitions for "observation," "finding," and "deficiency" may prompt spirited discussion at NELAC 8i. There was not enough time to ask other questions in the BoD teleconference.
- NELAC 8i agenda – Complete – Mr. Sotomayor noted that he had made one addition to the agenda, setting aside time for discussion of possible changes to Chapter 3. He indicated Mr. William Ingersoll to lead this discussion.

ASSESSORS' ELECTRONIC FORUM

The committee deemed the pilot assessors' electronic forum to have been a success. There was moderate discussion of how future forums might be improved. Suggestions for improvement included allowing more time for open discussion (debate), offering presentations from both the laboratory and the assessor perspective, encouraging assessors to bring a list of common

deficiencies noted in laboratory assessments, and having representatives from all NELAC committees present at the forum.

Mr. Sotomayor noted that he had received statistics from the forum website contractor compiled from feedback to the site. Feedback was generally positive. Most participants providing feedback indicated that they would recommend the seminar to other environmental professionals. Mr. Sotomayor also noted that most of the negative comments were in regard to some aspect of the mechanics of the presentations. It was noted that it is difficult to simultaneously fill the needs of experienced assessors and novice assessors. Mr. Sotomayor indicated that he would present the feedback from the electronic forum to stakeholders at NELAC 8i.

There was also moderate discussion of future plans for assessors' forums. There was some discussion of cost. The telephone-website pairing was noted to be economical and long-lived since questions and answers from the forum could be posted on the website. It was noted that only two forum questions remain unanswered. It was also noted that a future electronic forum could be offered via telephone lines alone if the presentation materials were distributed in advance. There was discussion of the feasibility of face-to-face forums in conjunction with interim or annual meetings and of the preferred frequency of forums. It was suggested that it would be beneficial to offer an assessors' forum each spring before the new standard becomes effective. It was also suggested that having different committees "co-host" the forum would spread the burden of labor. It was noted that the materials from the October 15, 2002, electronic forum are archived at the forum website.

Two short-term action items resulted from the discussion of the assessors' forum. Mr. Sotomayor indicated that he would prepare a presentation on the pilot electronic forum for NELAC 8i. He also indicated that he would approach INELA regarding opportunities for partnership or sponsorship for future forums.

PRESENTATION OF PROPOSED GLOSSARY DEFINITIONS AT NELAC 8i

Noting that the proposed glossary definitions for "observation," "finding," and "deficiency" may be considered controversial, the committee discussed strategies for their presentation at NELAC 8i. Mr. Sotomayor proposed presenting alternative definitions in addition to the definitions proposed by the On-site Assessment Committee so that stakeholders might arrive at something mutually agreeable through open discussion. It was suggested that the current NELAC definitions, the proposed On-site Assessment Committee definitions, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) definitions, and the American Society for Quality (ASQ) definitions be presented for consideration. Mr. Jack Hall indicated that he would contact Ms. Marlene Moore to compile these definitions and coordinate with Dr. Frederic Siegelman to prepare them for discussion at NELAC 8i. The committee decided not to include in its presentation definitions proposed by individuals, as each individual's definition has a degree of subjectivity. The committee agreed that their topic of discussion would focus on whether NELAC should accept formal definitions from another standard-setting organization or formulate its own.

In subsequent discussion, it was suggested that the controversy surrounding the definitions for “observation,” “finding,” and “deficiency” stems from the differing degrees of comfort that assessors and accrediting authorities may have in regard to the judgments that assessors may make on-site. The definitions cut to the heart of the philosophy of assessments. What discretion, authority, and responsibility does an assessor have to make judgments on-site? Must every deviation from the standards be cited as a deficiency?

It was noted that there are two types of deficiencies: 1) those that affect data quality and require immediate correction (critical findings), and 2) those that do not affect data quality and may be corrected over a period of time under a corrective action plan (general findings). Several participants noted that they recognize that all deficiencies do not have the same weight and establish a gradient of citation types in on-site assessments. This prompted discussion of consistency. It was acknowledged that not every assessor is looking at the same thing and that, in practical terms, an assessor cannot look at everything. It was also noted that failure of an assessor to cite a deficiency does not mean that the deficiency is not a problem. Dr. Siegelman and Mr. Daniel Hickman indicated that they would send their respective definitions for critical findings to the committee for review and discussion.

CHAPTER 5 CHECKLIST

Mr. Dyer requested that committee members submit their comments on the Chapter 5 checklist to him by November 6, 2002. Mr. Sotomayor indicated that he would include discussion of the checklist on the agenda for the November 6 teleconference. Mr. Dyer expressed his desire to finalize and post the checklist by January 2003 in order to have enough time for the complete assessment process before the expiration of laboratory accreditation certificates.

LOGISTICS FOR UPCOMING MEETINGS

- Teleconferences - Noting that the committee would not have a contract scribe for upcoming teleconferences, the committee decided to designate someone at each teleconference to take notes and prepare minutes.
- NELAC 8i - Mr. Sotomayor indicated that he would contact Ms. Barbara Giesler of the New Mexico Environment Department regarding audio-visual needs for the committee’s session at NELAC 8i.
- NELAC 9 and beyond – There was some discussion of concurrent scheduling of NELAC Proficiency Testing, On-site Assessment, and Quality Systems Committee sessions at past meetings. It was suggested that these meetings should not be concurrently scheduled to allow for more interaction between the committees on overlapping issues and concerns. Mr. Sotomayor indicated that he would share this concern with Ms. Hankins.

CONCLUSION

There being no further business to discuss, the meeting was adjourned shortly before 2:30 p.m. EST. The committee’s next meeting will be on Wednesday, November 6, 2002, at 1:00 p.m. EST via teleconference.

**ACTION ITEMS
ON-SITE ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE MEETING
OCTOBER 23, 2002**

Item No.	Action	Date to be Completed
1.	Mr. Sotomayor will prepare a presentation on the pilot assessors' electronic forum for NELAC 8i.	November 19, 2002
2.	Mr. Sotomayor will approach INELA regarding opportunities for partnership or sponsorship for future assessors' forums.	November 19, 2002
3.	Mr. Hall will contact Ms. Moore to compile definitions for "observation," "finding," and "deficiency" and coordinate with Dr. Siegelman to prepare them for discussion at NELAC 8i.	November 6, 2002
4.	Dr. Siegelman and Mr. Hickman will send their respective definitions for critical findings to the committee for review and discussion.	November 6, 2002
5.	Mr. Sotomayor will designate a committee scribe for upcoming teleconferences.	November 6, 2002
6.	Mr. Sotomayor will contact Ms. Giesler to confirm audio-visual equipment for the On-site Assessment Committee session at NELAC 8i.	November 6, 2002
7.	Mr. Sotomayor will contact Ms. Hankins to inform her of On-site Assessment Committee concerns in regard to the concurrent scheduling of committee sessions at future NELAC interim and annual.	November 19, 2002

**PARTICIPANTS
ON-SITE ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE MEETING
OCTOBER 23, 2002**

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Agenda
ON-SITE ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE MEETING
OCTOBER 23, 2002; 1:00-2:30 p.m. EDT

1:00 – 1:05	Attendance
1:05 – 1:10	Agenda Repair Announcements Status of Action Items Approval of Past Minutes
1:10 – 1:40	Assessors' Electronic Forum --Feedback/Reactions --NELAC 8i Presentation --Future Plans
1: 40 – 2: 15	Glossary Definitions --Strategy for NELAC 8i Presentation --Additional Discussion
2: 15 – 2:25	Logistics for Upcoming Meetings
2:25 – 2:30	Next Steps/Adjournment